The Girl With The Unicorn

Author(s): Mary Knight

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The Girl With The Unicorn

Mary Knight

My five year old relationship with my live in boyfriend had collapsed over my brief affair with my superior at work. I had thought I wasn't a lesbian but now I wasn't so sure and the resulting confusion had led to my admission to Ward 37. After three weeks there, I had sorted myself out and decided I wasn't. But I still saw sex everywhere and speculated about everyone, the staff included, whether they were virgins or not and what their inclinations were.

The patient who fascinated me most and seemed the most impregnable was Ginevra. She had been in hospital a week less than me. I remembered her coming in with another girl who visited every day, sometimes with others of the same age who looked like students. But Ginevra never spoke despite gifts and photos that were brought her.

She didn't speak to anyone on the ward either, staff or patients. At first food was brought to her on trays but eventually she drifted down to the dining room where she didn't eat much. She didn't go to occupational therapy or other groups. Her time was spent lying on her bed, face downwards or sitting staring in front of her, occasionally thumping her arms like a bird.

With her shallow blue eyes, quite expressionless with long black lashes and face equally blank, but very pretty with rounded shiny cheeks and lots of dark tangly hair, she looked just like a German china doll of the last century. She was in her early twenties, I guessed.

Her clothes were just as striking as her person. She wore pointed ankle length boots, a long sharp pink skirt trailing the ground and a dusky pink coat of some mossy velour-like material with pictures woven on it like a tapestry. It was an early hot autumn, after a glorious summer, and if she was warm, she didn't show it.

One of the pictures was that of a girl embracing a unicorn. I saw Ginevra as the virgin, the girl with the unicorn.

I felt sorry for her friend and one day intercepted her. She was plain and anxious looking.

'Ginevra never speaks to us,' I said.

'Yes,' said the girl, obviously relieved to talk to someone sympathetic. The words rushed out. 'It's been coming on for sometime ever since she got back from Scotland. She's always been a loner but recently it's got worse. I'm her flatmate by the way. I'm very fond of her.'

'Is she a student?'

'Yes, like me. A postgrad in archeology. She's very brilliant. In the spring, she went on a sort of working holiday to Scotland', the girl spoke with nervous intensity. 'She was looking forward to bird watching, one of her great hobbies. There was rumours of a pair of snowy eagles nesting on the island near where she was staying . . . I don't know what happened but she came home in a very strange state. And one day she started to bleed. And that was the first I knew of her pregnancy . . . I hope they can cure her in here'.

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'Oh yes, it's a very good place.'

And so we left it. I tried to talk to Ginevra after that and persuade her to eat with a group of us but she wouldn't. She just stared with her glassy eyes.

One afternoon, I went to an art therapy class. I forget which day it was, all days were the same in there. It was a stifling hot afternoon and a thunderstorm was forecast. The nurses had trouble getting the patients to go. But they managed in the end to get some of them there, walking with the slow walk of the heavily sedated. I went because I was bored.

Jill, the occupational therapist, greeted us briskly and got on with sticking large sheets of paper together with sellotape. The session was held in the art room, it was modern and airy, as cheerful as the authorities could make it, with the patients' pictures on the wall. These were fairly ordinary except for two or three which were the work of a promising artist who had had a psychotic breakdown and when he had recovered, he had painted some remarkable abstracts in browns and greens and yellows. He had left them behind when he was discharged and I spent a lot of time tracing sexual symbols in them.

When Jill had finished sellotaping, she drew a large island, with little islands offshore.

'I want each of you to draw a house on the island,' she said, 'log cabin or tree house or what you will and also show how you are to survive. Is the light in your eyes, Margery? Shall I draw the blinds?'

Margery, a big strong woman who amazingly was a battered wife, agreed and Jill drew the venetian blinds. The other patients watched with the exaggerated interest of children to whom any diversion is welcome. One blind had stuck and couldn't make it. A patient tried but it was no good.

The patients selected paints and crayons with a good deal of noise and discussion and settled reluctantly to the task. The occupational therapist was a forceful enthusiastic person who usually achieved results. She put a record of Carousel on the record player in the corner. Some finished quickly, others set about making an artistic job of it. I was one of these. I did a log cabin with a big garden in which I grew curly cabbages and turnips and carrots. Gardening was one of my passions.

About halfway through there was a stir and Ginevra came in. Everyone looked up, glad of the distraction. Jill greeted her calmly, as though this was nothing extraordinary and asked her to sit down. She explained the task and something began to flicker in those blue eyes.

Ginevra took a tiny offshore island and drew rings of brilliant colour round it. Everyone had finished and all had drawn isolated houses. Only Jill had done strategically placed bowls of food, linking up the islanders. She asked who was going to begin and to everyone's amazement, Ginevra, tearing off her island putting it in her pocket, began in a sweet rather creaky voice.

'The island was just in sight, I could see its rocky cliffs from my window. When the great white birds nested there, Marcus and I swam over . . .'

Suddenly, without warning, she began to take off her clothes, flinging them aside. The men leant forward. I caught the coat and sat stroking the unicorn's white horn. She stripped down to bra and pants and stopped.

'We hid waiting for the birds,' Ginevra went on, 'Then the female bird rose up, as if alarmed, with her big wing span outstretched, scattering her feathers like snow . . .'

Ginevra came to a halt, her arms outstretched like wings and the room

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full of warm feathers. Her eyes were alive with memory. She fell to the ground and began to grapple with an unseen adversary. Outside the sky grew dark and a few drops of rain hissed on the panes. Then Ginevra got up.

'We fell asleep and when we woke up, the nest was . . .'

She ran out of the room. Picking up her clothes, I followed her. She flung herself on the bed amidst storms of tears. Outside the weather had broken and rain was lashing against the windows. Carefully I covered her nakedness with a blanket and left her.

David Remfrey

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